« Congobéton Léopoldville. Congés payés du 1/1/57 au 31/12/57 »: Postwar Architecture, Construction Work and Local Labor in a Belgian Colony

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Ever since the first article on colonial architecture in the former Belgian Congo, the territory known today as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, appeared in 1986, a substantial amount of research has been conducted on the topic, scrutinizing late nineteenth-century prefabricated metal structures, the introduction of modernist ideas in design and planning since the 1920s, and the emergence of 1950s tropical modernism. More recently, the built production of the post-independence era has also gained attention, resulting in investigations of “nation building” campaigns under Mobutu Sese Seko’s rule or the work of the first generation of Congolese architects such as Fernand Tala N’gai. In line with more general trends in the historiography of colonial and postcolonial architecture, the perspective of scholarship has shifted from an approach focusing on issues of style and form to studies discussing the “politics” of (post)colonial architecture or the shaping of urban landscapes by a multitude of agents. Some scholars have started to examine the role of players such as missionary congregations or, for the period after 1960, development aid organizations, bringing to the fore a number of other actors, including patrons, technical consultants, financial experts, etc. What remains conspicuously absent from current scholarship, however, is an attention to the specific modes of production underlying this production.
particular legacy of twentieth-century architecture in Congo. The same holds true for investigations of the colonial and postcolonial architecture in other sub-Saharan regions, for that matter.

So far, the rapidly growing field of construction history has paid scant attention to the architectural production outside of Europe. However, the rare publications that do focus on the non-European context make abundantly clear that a lot can be gained by trying to understand if and how building projects were technically adapted to contexts where the state of the construction industry often differed significantly from that in the metropole; when and how new building materials and technologies were introduced, and by whom; and how building sites and labor involving local workers were organized. Following Antoine Picon’s definition of construction history as a discipline situated between technological and cultural history, we argue that formulating responses to such questions provides ample opportunity to write an alternative history of colonial/postcolonial architecture in Congo. To illustrate this claim, we will discuss a particular source that recently surfaced in the context of a research project at the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning of Ghent University: a one-page document entitled “Congobéton Léopoldville. Congés payés du 1/1/57 au 31/12/57,” which was unearthed in the vast archival holdings of a construction firm that was active in Congo from 1949 to the mid-1970s.

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6 “‘Tout le Congo est un chantier’. Re-assessing Congo’s architectural history from 1918 till 1975 through a construction history approach,” a four-year research project begun in January 2015 and financed via an FWO-grant (n° G053215N, 2015–2019). The research is currently conducted mainly by PhD candidate Robby Fivez, who is working under the supervision of Johan Lagae (Ghent University), Luc Taerwe (Ghent University), Rika Devos (Université libre de Bruxelles) and Jacob Sabakinu Kivilu (Université de Kinshasa).

7 In autumn 2013, a large part of the Blaton was donated to the Archives d’Architecture Moderne in Brussels. We thank its director, Maurice Culot, for granting us access to this fund and having allowed us to engage in an inventory and first analysis of the part related to Blaton’s activities in Africa. This preparatory work was conducted by Ludwine Van Craenenbroeck in the period 2013–2015, first as part of her Bachelor’s thesis and then within the context of her Master’s dissertation, both of which were supervised by Johan Lagae.
Congobéton was a branch of the important Belgian construction firm Blaton, which specialized in the immediate postwar years in constructions using pre-stressed concrete. In the mid-1940s, Blaton had developed a proprietary technology in close collaboration with an internationally renowned specialist in the field, professor Gustave Magnel from Ghent University. It soon promoted its unique expertise in pre-stressed concrete worldwide, securing its specific technique via a patent that was recognized internationally in over fifty countries. Blaton was also eager to implement this technology in the Belgian Congo, where it became active in 1949, the year in which the Ten Year Plan for the Economic and Social Development of the Belgian Congo was launched. Including huge investments in infrastructure, building, and urban planning, the plan created important opportunities for construction firms. Favorable economic conditions and an increase in the European population in Congo in those years also triggered a large number of private real estate operations in the major urban centers. As a result, Blaton founded a special branch for its activities in Congo entitled Compagnie Congolaise de Constructions (ccc), which had its official headquarters in Brussels and a local office in the capital city of Kinshasa (formerly known as Léopoldville). To that end, the firm soon constructed a multistory office building, thereby introducing the use of pre-stressed concrete technology to Central Africa. During construction work on this project, Blaton was confronted with several technical problems due the poor quality of prefabricated building components in concrete delivered by local entrepreneurs. As a result, Blaton decided to take over local production, buying up a nearby factory where such prefabricated elements were made. Soon afterwards, it founded a new firm named Congobéton to run this business. The official seat was, again, located in Brussels.

The document “Congobéton Léopoldville. Congés payés du 1/1/57 au 31/12/57” sheds light on a number of realities linked to building in postwar Africa that so far have been largely overlooked by scholars, as studies on the topic still tend to be written from the perspective of the history of individual architects. The document provides a list of names of African workers and their professional category and for each one of them details the number of days worked in 1957 and the number of days on leave, while indicating the salary they received and the amount of “paid leave” ("congé payé") to which they were entitled over the course of the year 1957. The document is quite unique, as the names enumerated in it lift these Congolese individuals out of anonymity. It challenges us to think in greater depth about the organization of a building site and the agency of African laborers, similarly to the way in which architectural drawings of the 1940s and 50s bearing the names of African draughtsmen push us to rethink the notion of “authorship” of architectural designs.

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9 The document mentions professions such as maçon (bricklayer), mécanicien (mechanic), ferrailleur (ironworker), and menuisier (carpenter), as well as containing more general indications such as ouvrier (worker) or spécialiste (specialist), and even chauffeur (driver). A particular profile included is capita, indicating a person in charge of supervising a team of workers. Some documents in the file also speak of a category “boy maçon,” who assisted some of these workers.
produced in a Congolese/African context. So far, scholarship presenting a “re-discovered” built legacy of modern(ist) architecture in the Global South has rarely paid attention to such sources that bring to the fore the local workforce needed to build these projects. Rarer still are studies that engage with the more bureaucratic side of the building process.

By providing specific information on “paid leave,” the document presented here is indicative of a major shift in labor policy during the postwar era in Congo. Several studies have been devoted to the harsh labor conditions imposed on Congolese during colonial times, and its authors have often provocatively accused the Belgian government of having installed a regime of “forced labor” in sectors like railroad construction or agricultural plantations.

The document “Congobéton Léopoldville. Congés payés du 1/1/57 au 31/12/57” suggests that, after 1945, times were a-changing. Social historians working on colonial history have already investigated the emergence of syndicalism in Congo in this period, demonstrating how, well into the 1950s, the Belgian government, Catholic missionaries, and colonial enterprises—the three classic “actors” of the Belgian colonial project—were reluctant to grant African workers social rights, and instead continued to develop a labor policy along paternalistic lines. Several files in the Blaton archive provide us with further information on such aspects in the realm of construction, including templates of contracts, of which a version was drawn up in the local language of Lingala. The contract stipulated the daily regime, including a long list of possible violations that could lead to disciplinary measures vis-à-vis the worker, but it also provided information on salary and the provision of medical services, as well as access granted to particular kinds of loans that enabled workers to buy a bicycle, for instance. Furthermore, internal reports from Congobéton reveal that African workers had representatives in the conseils d’entreprise or the administrative meetings of the firm who could voice their demands. In other words, these Africans had

10 Several such drawings can be found in the archive of the Public Works Department of the colonial administration, as our research in the National Archives of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Kinshasa made clear.


13 See for example Brood en Rozen: Tijdschrift voor de Geschiedenis van Sociale Bewegingen, n° 2, 1999, theme issue “Sociale bewegingen en Belgisch Congo” (with contributions by, among others, Zana Aziza Etambala and John Higginson).

14 Apart from penalizing those situations that could create a real risk on the building site, the list of fifteen violations explicitly stipulated that workers could not bring alcohol on the building site, that they were not allowed to smoke, and that refusing an order from a direct superior was a severe offence.
agency, and the Blaton archive provides us with some rare documents to start writing a (partial) social history of building in late colonial Congo.

The Blaton archival holdings also provide us with ample documentation to investigate and reflect in more precise terms on what “innovation” and “modernity” mean in the context of new building construction in the colony during the immediate postwar years: architectural drawings, including execution details providing insight into the technical conception of projects; lists and descriptions of materials to be used (often mentioning their origin); commercial brochures for all kinds of building components or amenities; a substantial series of photographic albums documenting particular building sites; daily reports on the progress made and difficulties met; various kinds of calculations of technical matters as well as budget-related questions; telegrams between people in the field and decision-makers in Brussels, etc. 15 All of this material can help broaden our understanding of the making and shaping of the built environment in Democratic Republic of the Congo. Moreover, by enumerating the names of individuals, the document “Congobéton Léopoldville. Congés payés du 1/1/57 au 31/12/57” provides a key for engaging in an oral history project that can complement the archive and suggest answers to particularly challenging questions such as: To what extent was the transfer of the new building technology of pre-stressed concrete from Belgium to Congo really a complicated matter? Did it require a specific kind of skilled labor and, if so, how where the necessary African workers recruited and trained? How were the different tasks on the building site distributed and who was in charge? How did African workers respond to a new technology like pre-stressed concrete and did it allow them to gain a new kind of expertise they could capitalize on afterwards?

Preliminary fieldwork conducted by Kim De Raedt in Kinshasa, where she interviewed African laborers involved in school building programs in the Democratic Republic of the Congo during the 1960s and 70s, 16 as well as a close reading of internal reports in the archive of the Compagnie Congolaise de Constructions and Congobéton have already provided some first useful pieces of information that invite us to more fully investigate the “local specificity” of the new division of labor that was introduced by concrete building construction—a division that, as Adrian Forty brilliantly demonstrated in his recent book Concrete and Culture, allowed for an easy separation between the purely manual elements of concrete construction and the mental aspects of the work. 17

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15 A first prospection of what such a wide variety of sources could bring to our understanding of postwar architecture in the Democratic Republic of the Congo was started in a research seminar with students from the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning of Ghent University, conducted in spring 2015 and supervised by Johan Lagae and Ricardo Agarez.
16 Kim De Raedt (Ghent University) conducted interviews with a number of former African construction workers during a research stay in Kinshasa in 2014. In 2000, Johan Lagae had already conducted an interview with a worker involved in the construction of one of Lubumbashi’s landmark buildings, the theater, constructed between 1953 and 1956.
Focusing on such local conditions of labor thus opens up new and fascinating lines of inquiry for rewriting the history of postwar architecture in Africa. Yet such research will inevitably confront us, architectural historians, with a challenge that scholars of postcolonial studies already engaged with long ago. For can we really “make the African [construction laborer] speak”?

« Congobéton Léopoldville. Congés payés du 1/1/57 au 31/12/57 ».  
Source: Brussels (Belgium), Archives d’Architecture Moderne, Blaton fund.
Index by keyword: colonial architecture, postcolonial architecture, corporate archives
Geographical index: Africa, Central Africa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kinshasa, Europe, Western Europe, Belgium
Chronological index: 20th century
Ancient territories: Léopoldville
Schlagwortindex: Kolonialarchitektur, Postkoloniale Architektur, Unternehmensarchive
Geographie: Afrika, Zentralafrika, Demokratische Republik Kongo, Kinshasa, Europa, Westeuropa, Belgien
Chronologischer Index: 20. Jahrhundert
Ehemalige Gebiete: Léopoldville
Indice de palabras clave: arquitectura colonial, arquitectura postcolonial, archivos de empresa
Geografía: África, África Central, República Democrática del Congo, Kinsasa, Europa, Europa Occidental, Bélïgica
Periodo: siglo xx
Antiguos territorios: Léopoldville
Index de mots-clés: architecture coloniale, architecture postcoloniale, archives d’entreprise
Index géographique: Afrique, Afrique centrale, République démocratique du Congo, Léopoldville, Kinshasa, Europe, Europe de l'Ouest, Belgique
Index chronologique: xx° siècle
Territoires anciens: Léopoldville
Parole chiave: architettura coloniale, architettura postcoloniale, archivi d’impresa
Indice geografico: Africa, Africa centrale, Repubblica Democratica del Congo, Kinshasa, Europa, Europa occidentale, Belgio
Indice cronologico: xx secolo
Territori antichi: Léopoldville